

## In Print and On Screen: Film Columns, Criticism, and Culture in Early Hollywood

---

Richard Abel. *Menus for Movieland: Newspapers and the Emergence of American Film Culture, 1913–1916*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. 424 pp. ISBN 9780520286788, \$34.95 (paperback).

David Bordwell. *The Rhapsodes: How 1940s Critics Changed American Film Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 176 pp. ISBN 9780226352206, \$20.00 (paperback).

---

David Bordwell's *The Rhapsodes: How 1940s Critics Changed American Film Culture* is not principally about films or filmmaking, and neither is Richard Abel's *Menus for Movieland: Newspapers and the Emergence of American Film Culture, 1913–1916*. Instead, both authors examine the evolution of the movie industry via the influence of film literature on "American Film Culture," the macro designation shared in the subtitles of both works. The resulting studies illustrate the historical interdependence between two businesses: the motion picture industry and the mass-market film literature industry. According to Abel, the film business was born on screen and in print, a partnership of production, exhibition, and film journalism. His primary aim is to rescue the widely read yet widely discarded "ephemera of modern industrial culture" (2) from 1913–1916, the years in which he says American film culture appeared. Newspapers' primary function, Abel "assumes," were to act as "menus or maps by which readers could make sense of the complexity of modern urban life" (2). They were instructive guidebooks to help readers navigate the modern world, and news articles about motion pictures served to educate audiences toward new technologies and art forms, especially as progress affected contemporary culture. By the 1940s, Hollywood had become iconic and moviegoers were accustomed to the modern world, but Bordwell's evaluation of four critics he calls "The Rhapsodes" indicates that although the film industry had grown and film literature had permeated the culture, the motion picture had yet to be accepted as a legitimate art form. As such, Bordwell frames his discussion within the Culture Industry thesis, revealing his critics as outliers who tabled the debate on mass culture and mostly relegated the high/middle/lowbrow cultural divisions to the outskirts of their film criticism, portending the continued relationship of the two industries with the concurrent rise of the New Hollywood and the celebrity film critic in the 1960s and 1970s.

In this joint evaluation of two publications about assorted film literature, bookended by the world wars and exploring the impact of writers on a new form of mass culture, I am interested by what means journalists and critics used the media to educate their readership about how to watch motion pictures and in what way their pieces informed aesthetic, endorsed ideology, and promoted show business. The readers of the “Film Girls” of the mid-1910s or of film critic James Agee a generation later were not passive consumers but were instead active participants helping to shape and secure the permanency of what Bordwell and Abel have modestly labeled “American Film Culture” and all of its concomitant ingredients—studios, movie theaters, newsstands, and spectators. By reviewing the texts, I aim to highlight that the movie industry and its surrounding culture have been resilient and remain robust, which to no small degree is due to the proliferation of film literature from both professionals as well as online amateur critics, the latter having naturally evolved from the American film culture as described in the 1910s and 1940s.

Richard Abel’s research unearths hundreds of motion picture pages from dozens of newspapers during Hollywood’s emergent years from 1913 to 1916. At the outset, he asks his readers to consider the value of the “sometimes flip, readily trashed” (1) but nonetheless omnipresent newspaper articles that captured the imaginations of American audiences who were frequenting a new form of mass entertainment that was cheap and presumably disposable. There was a “reciprocal and profitable alignment between these ‘trash twins’” of modern industrial culture, Abel explains, “that blurred technological, social, and cultural boundaries” (2). The author is most interested in the makeup and motives of the newspaper writers, studio publicists, and motion picture exhibitors responsible for the wealth of daily and weekly film literature in the 1910s. At the center of his inquiries, and integral to Abel’s arguments, are the ambitions of the film industry to generate audience engagement by encouraging a homogenous national viewing community. At the same time, he says, local newspapers undertook a slightly conflicting resolve, curating a more heterogeneous audience representative of their city’s readership. Abel never fully reconciles this cross-purpose, but he does show that in just four short years, the film business changed. Hollywood was, to a great degree, born in the daily “movie menus.”

Newspapers were already a dominant form of mass culture prior to the arrival of motion pictures. Not until 1914, according to Abel, did they begin to print movie news in earnest, a development that coincided with the standardization of film production; the erection of permanent movie houses; the advent of the movie star; and the arrival of bigger, better, and longer feature presentations. Abel’s sources

include papers from dozens of cities, but there was a particular focus on the Midwest, the region where he sees the most investment and the most interest in the news business acting as a “cultural partner” to the movies. Chicago and Cleveland had large populations and high circulations and were thus naturally on the forefront of new journalism that would be relevant to their readers. Indeed, the *Chicago Tribune*’s Kitty Kelly (real name Audrey Alspaugh) and, later, Mae Tinee (the movie-themed nom de plume for Frances Peck) were two of the most popular and widely read motion picture columnists in the country in the 1910s. What was much more promising to the budding of American film culture, however, was the prevalence of movie articles in smaller cities across the Midwest and across the country. In Toledo, Ohio, and in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; in Fort Wayne, Indiana; and in La Crosse, Wisconsin, newspapers tapped into the cultural conversation on the newest picture shows and steered their customers toward local movie houses.

Abel observes movie journalism appearing in stages. Early indications of newspapers’ interest were printed in the *Seattle Times* and the *Minneapolis Journal* in 1911, he says, and these initial stories were probably not incentivized by film producers but instead were generated through a “local nexus of editors, reporters, exhibitors, and moviegoers” (73). In this bottom-up narrative, film culture began to grow organically out of local and regional interests in photoplays. Most newspapers remained circumspect, however, unsure of the benefits of offering free advertising to production companies. By 1913 producers and distributors started to release movie news and marketing materials to local outlets more efficiently and more effectively, primarily from their newly formed publicity departments. Armed with free content, which Abel describes as a “form of paid advertising” (23), the news and film industries struck a promotional balance as they both endeavored toward a mutually beneficial and increasingly lucrative business relationship, all while nurturing a budding cultural partnership. In the final stage, beginning in late 1914, newspapers introduced regular movie review columns designed to educate audiences on how to evaluate the pictures for themselves.

In addition to publicity materials supplied by the manufacturers, much of the motion picture news in the early 1910s revolved around reader participation and the new phenomenon of the movie star. Newspapers launched contests, enticing readers to send in reviews of their favorite movies. In spring 1915, Mae Tinee of the *Chicago Tribune*, recognizing that actors Mary Pickford, Theda Bara, and the young Charles Chaplin, among others, were dominating the screen, asked her readers to write an essay highlighting their favorite star and detailing

what about him or her they found appealing. The winning entry would receive a \$50 prize (132). Readers also had the opportunity to learn about actors through interviews and profiles. In 1915 McClure Newspaper Syndicate began to distribute “Daily Talks by Mary Pickford” to affiliates around the country. The column allowed the actress to reach the audience directly, “creating a kind of communal fan culture with her countless letter writers” (161). She answered questions and offered advice, serving as self-promoter, role model, and amateur therapist. Newspapers opened a dialogue that has become endemic to film culture, with the screen and the page working in tandem to form a bond between cultural producer and consumer.

The majority of these features were written by women, and as Abel shows, evidence suggests that young women and girls represented the bulk of the readership as well. That women played such a dominant role in fostering American film culture and attained prominent positions in both the news industry (as writers and editors) and show business (as actresses) uncovers a significant chapter in the larger story of the “New Woman” of turn-of-the-century America. The list of names is nearly endless. Gertrude Price operated as the “moving picture expert” of the Scripps-McRae newspapers. Kitty Kelly and Mae Tinee governed movie news in Chicago for several years, along with Louella Parsons of the *Chicago Herald*. Daisy Dean’s “News Notes from Movieland” from the Central Press Association was reprinted across the Midwest. These so-called “Film Girls,” including the film columnist for the *Syracuse Herald* who signed her pieces as “The Film Girl,” profiled stars, wrote gossip columns, and printed question-and-answer sections that were instrumental in nurturing a fan community that was increasingly populated by middle-class, white, “new” women and girls.

One such fangirl, a fifteen-year-old Chicago suburbanite named Edna Vercoe, clipped newspaper articles and pasted them into scrapbooks for safekeeping. After 100 years, the scrapbooks survive, and Abel’s examination of their contents supports his conclusions about the importance of newspapers and their promotion of moviegoer immersion into “movieland.” They contain clippings from the serialized *The Perils of Pauline* and are brimming with star portraits, including Mary Pickford and Mary Fuller. Also included in the collection are correspondences with her friends, which may corroborate Abel’s presumption that perhaps “many middle-class teenage girls were engaged in making movie fan scrapbooks and decorating their bedroom walls with star photos” (270), cultural practices that would be familiar to suburban girls today. Although it is unclear how widespread such scrapbooking was in 1915—whether or not Ms. Vercoe was atypical, representative, or a prototype—her collection obliges Abel’s research,

and the compendium is his study's most important single source. Moreover, it suggests that women were both the primary writers and the primary readers of film literature. Indeed, women apparently became so identified with film writing for the next several decades that Bordwell, in his discussion of film critic Otis Ferguson's predilection for masculine cinema in the 1940s, quips that perhaps Ferguson wanted to "disprove *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross's claim that movie reviewing was for 'women and fairies'" (37).

Not surprisingly, when the dailies and weeklies finally started to include film reviews on a regular basis in late 1914 and into 1915, they too were primarily written by women. These reviewers had distinct styles and diverse readers, but nearly all sought to train movie audiences "how best to read and understand artistic texts, works, and performances" (182). The *Chicago Herald's* Louella Parsons, for example, wrote not just about stars but also stories that she believed were the cornerstone of any good picture. She even wrote a column entitled "How to Write Photoplays," instructing would-be screenwriters on good technique and the importance of scenario. Kitty Kelly of the *Chicago Tribune* was a voracious reader of the trade press, passing on the latest industry reports to her fans. Her successor at the *Tribune*, Mae Tinee, shared Kelly's love of language, and her reviews were often biting, her prose sharp, and her recommendations pithy. Their male counterparts were increasingly influential cultural partners to the industry as well. "Wid" Gunning of New York's *Evening Mail* admired the uniquely cinematic close-up and, according to Abel, he offered an eight-point criteria for film criticism. Confusingly, Abel lists only seven criteria: Story, Photography, Settings, Locations, Detail, Star, and Direction (194). Some of these reviewers were moralistic and others were glib, but they all accepted Hollywood films as a new normal in popular entertainment and recognized the importance of evaluating the local offerings and lending their commentary to the masses.

Abel manages to clearly express the rise and rapid evolution of motion picture news from 1913 to 1916, and his conclusions are of interest, if not quite a "substantial revision of what the movies and moviegoing could have meant" (3), as he alleges. To supplement the primary chapters that trace the development of film news—including the roles of the newspaper editors, exhibitors, and moviegoers, as well as the influence of industry publicists—the book includes entr'actes between chapters, each of which features further evidence of a burgeoning print culture. These interstitials encompass, in order, discussions of local and regional newsreels, newspaper movie contests, comic strips, and weeklies dedicated to motion picture news. An added bonus is the inclusion of useful primary source articles at the end of each chapter. Taken together, Abel successfully argues

that newspaper “menus” played a fundamental role in the creation of “movieland,” or the “imaginary discursive space of work and play” (274) that characterized the budding American film culture.

Twenty-five years later, Bordwell’s “Rhapsode” critics advanced the tradition of film criticism established in the early period of the film and film literature businesses. In defiance of the midcentury cultural critics, who labeled the middlebrow products of Hollywood as dangerous Trojan horses sent to destroy legitimate, highbrow culture from within, Bordwell rejects the same cultural criticism that the film critics he examines in *The Rhapsodes* mostly ignored. Bordwell begins by discarding Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s assessments of the Hollywood system as an assembly line. “Hollywood employs an *artisanal* mode of production ... and the ‘product’ is a complex blend of overlapping and crisscrossing contributions” (30) Bordwell clarifies, noting that all art, high or low, owe debts to professional norms. To limit true art to the unique, he argues, is disingenuous. Filmmaking is expensive and collaborative by its nature and to claim that the Hollywood industrial machine was in the business of solely manufacturing facsimiles was to misunderstand not only the art of cinema but also the movie business. Moviemaking is expensive and employs countless cultural producers, a circumstance that demands studios and exhibitors consider profit, which is anathema to the high-minded avant-gardists who disavow economic capital in favor of unadulterated culture.

The film industry also indirectly employed those cultural producers in the film literature business, including Otis Ferguson, James Agee, Manny Farber, and Parker Tyler, whom Bordwell argues were underappreciated in the 1940s but nonetheless influential for subsequent cohorts of film critics. They took films seriously, often treating them as high art, helping to legitimize Hollywood. Furthermore, by failing to condemn movies—by having a “sensitivity to nuances within popular art” (31)—these four critics represented what the author, borrowing from social scientist David Riesman, calls a Newer Criticism. Similar to motion picture journalists in the 1910s, the Rhapsodes opened a cultural discourse with moviegoers, habituating audiences toward film aesthetics and sharing in a “taste exchange” (34) with the newly branded cinephile. For their time, they offered up an alternative criticism, shucking the traditional intellectualism restricted to academia and the avant-garde in favor of a high-minded and sharp-witted populism that was both exciting and unpretentious.

Otis Ferguson was the oldest and first to die of the Rhapsodes. His earliest film review was published in the *New Republic* in 1934, and he would continue to write about novels, theater, jazz, and movies for the magazine until he enlisted in the Merchant Marines in 1942. As Bordwell describes him, he was a drinker and a fighter, a surly

pseudo-intellectual who spurned lazy prose and loved *It Happened One Night* and *Footlight Parade*. Ferguson's tastes were aligned with motion pictures he considered entertaining and honest, usually those containing a smooth, easily understood narrative and a certain naturalism. He also concentrated his efforts on educating readers about how movies were made, "point[ing] the way toward a deeper understanding" (58) of Hollywood's process, a pursuit shared by Kitty Kelly twenty-five years earlier. By the time he fell victim to an enemy bomb in the Mediterranean in 1943, Ferguson had galvanized a new cadre of film critics who were seemingly embroiled in a "prose arms race ... each pushing beyond Ferguson to convey the elusive rush of the movie under their eyes" (19).

Like Ferguson, James Agee was intemperate and rough, and his reviews in both *Nation* and *Time* magazines implicitly mediated the middlebrow culture debate by serving as a check to the mannered and the WASPY. Bordwell explains that he "rebutted the critics of mass culture who simply did not know how to watch a movie" (77) and explored the aesthetic possibilities of composition, inviting viewers to actively connect with the images on the screen. Agee had a catholic taste—he admired the films of John Huston and considered Charlie Chaplin a genius—but he was rarely resolute. He often rewrote his reviews and employed what Bordwell calls "verbal double talk" (71), exposing an ambivalence that could elicit frustration from any reader trying to discern his verdict on a particular film. Unlike Ferguson, Agee is perhaps best remembered today not as a film critic but as the screenwriter of Huston's *The African Queen* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of the autobiographical novel *A Death in the Family* (1957).<sup>1</sup>

When Agee left his post at the *Nation* in 1949, he arranged for his friend and rival Emanuel Farber to replace him, Farber having already forged his own legacy as the successor to Otis Ferguson at the *New Republic*. Bordwell calls Manny Farber an "aesthete cowboy" (83), perhaps even more bellicose than either Ferguson or Agee and as masculine as the films he admired. Like Agee, Farber performed analytical deep dives, and his writing was verbose and particular, and he, Ferguson, and Agee often invoked a defiant machismo typical of the midcentury American ethos but surely difficult to swallow for any twenty-first-century reader. Aesthetically, he appreciated the use of negative space, with Bordwell noting that "Farber had a stronger pictorial sensibility than either Agee or Tyler" (101), placing him right alongside Kitty Kelly, whom Richard Abel says "drew her readers' attention to certain elements of 'pictorial style' unique to motion pictures" (234). Above all, Farber favored the so-called B movies, those lacking pretention or condescension. During his later career as critic

1. James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (New York: McDowell Obelnsky, 1957).



for the *Nation*, he showed even more antipathy to the middlebrow “prestige” pictures but for different reasons than cultural critics would have. Hollywood movies had simply gotten worse. During the 1950s, he would even frequently change his mind about movies he had reviewed in the 1940s, performing an about-face on Hitchcock and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, both now deemed minor.

Even more noteworthy is Bordwell’s inclusion of gay, intellectual, avant-gardist Parker Tyler into the Rhapsode clique. For one, Tyler disregarded Ferguson’s legacy of continuity, naturalism, and masculine virility in favor of dreamscapes, surrealism, mythology, and homosexuality. In contrast to the others, who held residencies at weeklies or monthlies, Tyler forged a career freelancing for smaller magazines and publishing in quarterlies. He was more academic than his Rhapsode associates and his references were suitably recondite, offering a discrete critical voice that remains little-known today. Not surprisingly, he viewed Hollywood movies as reproducible “group products” (118). If there is an outlier within the group, it is Tyler. His influence remained on the fringe and in the avant-garde, and his views were uncomfortably close to critics of mass culture.

The key difference that divorces Tyler from the cultural critics is his refusal to lament Hollywood’s existence or what that meant for culture. Instead, he cleverly diagnosed Hollywood with narcissism and then maintained the condition was to its benefit. Mainstream American films were so self-absorbed and the business of Hollywood so self-important that the result was an egotistical ambition that sometimes bore emotion and “reveale[d] some important capacities of cinema as a whole” (118). He liked movies, or at least some of them. Bordwell concludes that Tyler was primarily in it for the fun. “Unlike the mass culture scolds, he’s not laying bare the dark soul of American culture,” Bordwell explains. “He’s shocking and amusing himself, and us” (124). Given his tenuous presence at the Rhapsode table, it is no surprise that Tyler is the most difficult of the critics to unpack, but Bordwell’s discussion of “reflectionism,” specifically how Hollywood movies mirror American society, helps readers to appreciate Tyler’s point of view and understand his points of reference. In particular, Bordwell examines the symptomatic power of Hollywood films to reflect the “anxieties, concerns, and unresolved problems ... that society either ignores or suppresses” (115). For Tyler, Freudian psychoanalysis—with its focus on dreams and sexuality—and mythology could serve as analytical frameworks to best understand movies. In *The Hollywood Hallucination* (1944),<sup>2</sup> Tyler regards

2. Parker Tyler, *The Hollywood Hallucination* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944).



the movies as dreams, not unlike the whimsy and illusion of the cult of the movie star or Richard Abel's discussion of imaginary discursive spaces. For Tyler, however, his writing reflects his interpretation; his prose is often enigmatic and beguiling, like an existential reverie. To that end, he was an entertainer, and Bordwell rightly compares his style to a circus.

If Bordwell saves a seat for Tyler, then I will make the case to include two earlier film writers, both subjects in *Menus for Movieland*, as honorary members of the Rhapsodes. The first is Kitty Kelly, film writer and reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune* and later the *Chicago Examiner*. In addition to reporting on the trade press, unique for film columnists in the 1910s, she was unafraid of politics, imploring her readers to travel outside of the city to see a banned picture or endorsing a suffragette screening of *The Battle Cry of Peace*, a 1915 pro-war piece. Her reviews could be bold, sometimes caustic, yet also often educational, training moviegoers how best to digest motion pictures. She also fixated on the "pictorial" and insisted that movies should be treated as art. In 1916 she cemented her role as an earlier analog to the Rhapsodes when she devoted a column condemning the "highbrows" who turned their noses up at cinema (237). The second reviewer I would invite into the Rhapsodes is "Wid" Gunning, of New York's *Evening Mail*. In addition to his stated criteria for reviewing film, he believed that the close-up was unique, extolling the promise of the relationship between film camera and actor. Gunning assumed at least partial credit for film moving toward the arts, identifying the cultural influence of not only motion pictures but also those who write about them as well, especially himself. Abel alludes to the lasting influence of these pioneering film journalists, asking his readers to consider that perhaps these early reviewers were inventing avenues to interpretation that were to be greatly expanded in the ensuing years.

One of the remaining unanswered questions for Hollywood and the film literature business is the intended audiences for movies and movie reviews. Abel's discussion of the homogenous aims of nascent Hollywood to create a national viewing community came into a minor opposition with the heterogeneity of individual markets. Still, it is clear that white film producers, white actors, and white journalists were targeting spectators that were increasingly native, white, and middle class, with women and girls the primary demographic. The Rhapsodes did not write for daily newspapers but instead for magazines whose readers were, on the whole, wealthier and more educated than the average worker in the 1940s. It would have been beneficial for Bordwell to have included an examination of the readership, but it is safe to infer that, because the demographics of show business remained unchanged, so too did its audience. Hollywood and the film

literature industry were not only cultural partners but also business partners as well, as neither would be economically viable without the other. This symbiotic relationship continues to this day, whether in newspapers, magazines, journals, or, most prevalently, online. Popular culture is big business, and from the Golden Age of Hollywood to today, film culture has been reliant on active audiences to become purveyors of the middlebrow.

Because critics and columnists wrote about movies, a permanent American film culture arose around what were originally assumed to be ephemeral experiences. Importantly, cinema survived the attacks of the cultural critics, embedding itself within mass market entertainment and ingratiating itself to the critics who celebrated the possibilities of cinema to reflect society, present an authentic experience, elicit emotion, and offer entertainment. Having said that, viewers and readers were not of primary concern to either Abel or Bordwell, both of whom are more interested in the agency of cultural producers—in this case newspaper publishers, film distributors, exhibitors, and critics—to educate their audience on what movie to see, where to watch it, and how to interpret its themes and evaluate its craftsmanship.

Both books serve as preambles to the current movie climate and are fitting for students of cinema, culture, and business, the last of which serves as the cultural throughline, as Hollywood—outside the realm of the highbrow and its disregard of economic capital—is chiefly concerned with producing fiscally tenable products and marketing them to an audience that will act as paying customers. Hollywood's earliest, most tried-and-true marketing campaigns have been, as Abel has shown, in the papers. Today, those campaigns envelop the medium's digital successors just as film criticism has migrated online. Both authors admit their studies are not exhaustive, and Abel in particular finishes his book with a slew of questions. Still, both volumes illuminate important figures that helped to create and sustain a vibrant American film culture, and they inform the legitimacy of the middlebrow sensibilities of the American film industry and its cultural partnership with the business of film literature. Because of this complementary dialogue, the pieces make for an agreeable double feature.

Carter Ringle

Indiana University, Fort Wayne

E-mail: ringcd01@ipfw.edu

doi:10.1017/eso.2017.51

Published online November 16, 2017